Arkansas Democrat To Gazette

Arkansans in D.C. find Bush's plan uninspiring

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Posted on Thursday, January 11, 2007

URL: http://www.nwanews.com/adg/National/178520/

WASHINGTON — Members of Arkansas' congressional delegation reacted coolly to President Bush's new strategy to increase troop levels in Baghdad, which he announced Wednesday night.

There was nothing new about it, said Rep. Vic Snyder.

It would strain our military, argued Rep. Marion Berry, like Snyder, a Democrat.

Rep. John Boozman, the only Republican member from Arkansas, said he was hopeful that the additional 21, 500 troops would stabilize Baghdad. But he was concerned whether the increase would be enough to establish calm in the Iraqi capital.

"It is very appropriate to question [Bush's plan]," Boozman responded when asked whether his Republican House colleagues' solid support for Bush on the war had taken a hit since the November midterm elections.

If it becomes evident that the plan isn't working after a few months, "we need to very quickly hold the president accountable," Boozman said.

Congress should not "micromanage" the war, Boozman said, and he denounced efforts to limit funding for Iraq. But he acknowledged that the changing face of battle there has made it tough to grasp exactly what is needed to succeed. During his visits to the country, he said, he received conflicting reports.

"I've had generals and colonels who thought we need to increase troops," Boozman said, "and I've heard from generals and colonels who said, 'Don't send anymore troops. They're doing more harm than good.""

Snyder, a member of the House Armed Services Committee, did not support the 2002 vote authorizing the use of force in Iraq. Since then, he's been to Iraq three times and said he does not have a clear idea of how to achieve victory.

If things get worse in Iraq, Snyder said, an overwhelming number of Americans will figure the effort has been a waste and demand an immediate pullout, something some of Snyder's Democratic colleagues have called for. That point, in his estimation, had not been reached.

Still, he said he was not convinced Bush's plan would achieve anything. "I didn't see the kind of newness I thought I might see" in Bush's speech, he said. "I didn't see any metrics for measuring success or failure."

Snyder said past efforts to send additional troops to Baghdad had done little to suppress violence there.

Bush warned that the troop increase would lead to more attacks on U. S. soldiers that "will make the year ahead bloody and violent." But he said failure was not an option in what he called "the decisive ideological struggle of our time."

But he acknowledged that he would have to be more flexible and seek input from members of Congress now that Democrats control both the House and Senate.

Members of the Bush team, including new Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, will have a chance to flesh out the plan on Capitol Hill starting today when he testifies before Snyder's Armed Services Committee.

Sen. Mark Pryor will hear from Gates on Friday when he testifies before the Senate Armed Services Committee. The president's speech, Pryor said, lacked details. Gates, he hoped, will fill in the gaps.

"I'm still not convinced this is a good idea," Pryor said.

Rep. Mike Ross and eight other members of the Blue Dog Coalition, a group of fiscally conservative Democrats, visited with key authors of the Bush plan at the White House for an hour Wednesday.

The new strategy is "simply more of the same," said Ross, a co-chairman of the Blue Dogs, after meeting with J. D. Crouch, a deputy national security adviser, and Keven Bergner, Bush's senior director for Iraq. In a statement issued before Bush's speech, Ross said he favors giving the Iraqi military and government more responsibility for providing security.

"I am disappointed that the president appears to be set on a course of redeployment that will stretch our military, including the National Guard and Reserves, too thin," Ross said.

In a statement, Berry said the speech left him even more concerned about Bush's "failure to recognize the severity of this conflict."

Sen. Blanche Lincoln called the plan a "high-risk strategy" and called upon Bush to provide a specific date for an American troop withdrawal.

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